

when the wolf growls at the door . . . I am solid . . . I am steady . . . I am true down to the core . . . I'm an American soldier."

Words from Toby Keith's "American Soldier."

Mr. Speaker, today I rise in honor of a young American soldier, Private First Class Wesley Robert Riggs, who died serving our Nation in Iraq. Private First Class Riggs, in only 19 years, had exhibited a lifetime of dedication and duty. He was killed during a patrol on May 17, 2005, near Tikrit, Iraq, when a roadside bomb exploded.

He was a native of Baytown/Beach City, Texas. Wesley graduated in 3 years from Barbers Hill High School in 2003. He was active in the Future Farmers of America. To Wesley's Ag teachers, he was well devoted to the curriculum and is remembered for his skills in Ag Mechanics and Meats Technology. They recall his love of fishing, hunting and anything outdoors.

Before enlisting in the United States Army in 2004, Wesley spent his days like many other young Texans. He enjoyed hanging around with friends and working on cars. He liked four-wheeling and camping. He was also a member of the Houston Olympic weight lifting team.

He attended Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Mt. Belvieu, Texas. Reverend Andrew Moore, Wesley's Pastor at Holy Trinity, recalls a dedicated young man that was extremely motivated and driven. He dreamed of a career in law enforcement after his years in the military.

A number of his band of brothers in the military paid tribute to Wesley at his funeral service. Others commemorated him at his memorial service that I was able to attend this past Memorial Day weekend. They all spoke of a comrade who illustrated exemplary service.

To date, Mr. Speaker, in Operation Iraqi Freedom, our United States Army alone has lost 93 Texans in combat-related casualties. It is interesting to note that one out of every ten Americans in the United States military comes from the Lone Star State.

Our military cannot replace individuals of such exceptional character as Private First Class Riggs. However, his service will provide a stirring example for the men and women who carry forward his tenacious fight against tyranny, terror and treachery.

Moreover, Private First Class Riggs helped to establish a democracy, the historic start of which I was privileged to witness in Iraq this past January. Freedom does not come, Mr. Speaker, because somebody carries a sign in protest. It comes because of sacrifice.

So if today we could hear from Private First Class Wesley Riggs himself, as a member once and always of the United States Army, as a member of the Infantry, called "the Queen of Battle," he would resonate the remainder of Toby Keith's "American Soldier."

"And I always will do my duty, no matter what the price. I have counted

up the cost, I know the sacrifice . . . I don't want to die for you, but if dying is asked of me, I will bear that cross with honor, cause freedom don't come free . . . I am out here on the front line. Sleep in peace tonight . . . I am an American Soldier, an American, an American Soldier."

Private First Class Riggs might also hear the words that were spoken many years ago regarding the band of brothers in Henry V. He could say, inspired by Shakespeare, "For he that sheds his blood with me is my brother. From this day to the ending of the world. But we in it shall be remembered, we few, we happy few, we band of brothers."

Private First Class Riggs, we will not forget you, an Army of one. He received the Bronze Star, Purple Heart, National Defense Service Medal, Global War on Terrorism Medal and the Army Service Ribbon. We thank you, Private First Class Riggs, for your service, your dedication and sacrifice to your country.

HEARING FROM AMERICA ON UNITED AIRLINES PENSION COLLAPSE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Mr. GEORGE MILLER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. GEORGE MILLER of California. Mr. Speaker, Congress needs to hear from America about the severe loss of private pensions. Tonight, I would like to share with my colleagues some of the testimony my Democratic colleagues and I have received through the first-ever congressional E-hearing.

It is clear from United Airlines' attempt to dump \$6.6 billion onto the Federal pension agency known as the Pension Benefit Guarantee Corporation and to cut over \$3 billion in pension benefits from its employees that the Federal pension laws are seriously broken.

Like United, other large companies have also abused Federal law to terminate their employees' pension plans and to deeply reduce the retirement security that hard-working Americans had every right to expect to have. These runaway pension terminations threaten employees, investors and taxpayers.

In the case of United, if it is allowed to dump all of its pension obligations onto the Federal Government, then its competitor airlines will seek to do the same. This is a real crisis, and it demands action. This crisis is about hard-working employees who in many cases will lose half or even more than half of the nest egg promised by their employers.

United failed to put away enough for the hard times, but it is the employees and taxpayers that are suffering the consequences. Congress needs to hear from United employees and from other Americans suffering from the collapse of private pension plans.

But, as with so many other important pocketbook issues, this Congress,

under the Republican leadership, does not listen. It does not afford average Americans an opportunity to be heard.

Democrats are listening, and we want to hear from America.

To do that, my Democratic colleagues and I on the Committee on Education and the Workforce, and also with the gentlewoman from Illinois (Ms. SCHAKOWSKY), held the first-ever congressional E-hearing. We set up an online forum to hear from experts on the United pension crisis and from the employees and the retirees themselves.

The response has been overwhelming. We have received some 2,000 heart-breaking e-mails. These statements demonstrate what a real crisis looks like. I want to share with my colleagues and the public some of these e-mails. On my Web site you can read all of the testimony at house.gov/georgemiller.

Here is the testimony of Mynette Wijnveldt, of Mililani, Hawaii, who writes: "My husband and I were both employed as United Airlines flight attendants for 27 years. In 2001, he was diagnosed with a rare illness and became totally disabled. At age 50, he had to medically retire because he was no longer able to work. While I am still employed by United, I am seriously concerned about our future."

"If United is allowed to dump this pension our family will be hit very hard. My husband's medical retirement was severely reduced due to the early retirement factors, and I have lost 35 to 40 percent because of cuts in the plans resulting from the negotiated changes to our contract."

"If United is able to dump our pensions on the PBGC and walk away from its promise, we stand to lose our home and I will be working until I can no longer do so."

Here is another testimony, from Proctor Lucius in Carlsbad, California: "I sit in jeopardy of losing over 70 percent of my monthly income and with financial obligations not only for my immediate family but assisted living care for my elderly mother. Our future is very ominously bleak. As you are well aware, the costs for everything, especially medical care, are increasing astronomically and Social Security is pitifully inadequate to compensate. Now Social Security is in jeopardy of being thrown into the giant casino of Wall Street. Where does it end?"

Mrs. E.L. Smith of Hanover, Pennsylvania, wrote: "My husband is a retired United Airline pilot with 33 years of loyal service to the company. He also is a two-tour veteran of the Vietnam War with service to his country. I am a second generation, former United Airlines customer service employee. We have an 18-year-old son starting college and a 9-year-old daughter. The loss of my husband's pension will be very difficult for our family, but the loss of medical care will cripple us. Many retirees are in this position, and due to preexisting medical conditions, they will not be able to afford coverage."

"It is frightening to know that the company that has been the backdrop of our lives for decades would do this to us. For many, this is a life-threatening situation.

"My husband was diagnosed with renal cell carcinoma and had a heart attack in 2002. I was diagnosed with cancer 2 years before that. We have significant out-of-pocket medical expenses at this time, and the pension loss will put us in a very precarious position. We will not be able to afford coverage. Please pass legislation to ensure that they do not terminate our pension."

These and many other statements, over 2,000, were submitted to our congressional E-hearing at the Committee on Education and Workforce. This is what a real crisis looks like. Now is the time for Congress to act. Now is the time to do that.

I urge my colleagues to join me in passing H.R. 2327, a bill that would put a 6-month moratorium on the pension terminations currently planned by United Airlines. During this 6-month period, Congress must act to stop companies from unfairly dumping their pension losses. This will allow United and its employees to negotiate a solution through the collective bargaining process. We must not let these hard-working Americans down. We must listen to these Americans. We must understand the tragedy that has befallen them and the financial situations that they have been thrust into after a lifetime of hard work on behalf of United Airlines.

KEEPING MARINES LIKE SECOND LIEUTENANT ILLARIO PANTANO

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. JONES) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. JONES of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, this past Friday I had the pleasure of attending an American Legion fund-raiser in Wilmington, North Carolina, where the guest of honor was Marine Second Lieutenant Illario Pantano. As you know, I have spoken at great length about Lt. Pantano and his dedication and service to the Marine Corps and to our Nation.

Friday was a day of excitement and disappointment for me. I shared in the joy with his family as they celebrated the dismissal of the charges against him. But it was also a bittersweet celebration as Lt. Pantano announced his resignation from the Marine Corps.

I know the future will bring much happiness for him and his beautiful family, but I was saddened to think that the Marines were losing such an outstanding officer because of such an unfortunate situation.

Mr. Speaker, I was overcome with emotion as Lt. Pantano gave me his officer's sword after he announced his resignation. I cannot bring the sword on the floor of the House because of the rules, which I understand. It is an

honor I unwillingly accepted but will always treasure.

As I look at the sword, I cannot help but think that this whole matter could have been avoided by a more thorough investigation and appraisal of the charges before an Article 32 hearing was held.

All along, I had confidence that the Marine Corps would ultimately come to the right conclusion and exonerate Lt. Pantano of all charges, and, thankfully, that has indeed happened. My only hope is that, in the future, if any other such allegations are to come forward about another member of our Armed Services, a more efficient and complete investigation will take place before this situation ever gets to the seriousness of an Article 32 hearing.

Mr. Speaker, our men and women in uniform are our Nation's defenders and heroes. We are blessed to have so many young, brave Americans willing to risk their lives in the name of freedom.

Lt. Pantano was an outstanding leader that I would be proud to call my son or son-in-law.

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I believe his resignation is a great loss for the Marine Corps and a great loss for America.

Let us make sure that in the future we do not lose any more of our Nation's defenders the way we have lost Lieutenant Pantano.

Mr. Speaker, I will close by asking God to bless our men and women in uniform, I will ask God to please bless the families of our men and women in uniform, and I will ask God to please bless America and the future of this great Nation.

Mr. DELAHUNT. Mr. Speaker, will the gentleman yield?

Mr. JONES of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, I am delighted to yield to the gentleman from Massachusetts (Mr. DELAHUNT).

Mr. DELAHUNT. Mr. Speaker, I just want to say that I am sure that the good lieutenant has recognized what a wonderful advocate he has had here on the floor of the House. I think that the gentleman should be commended for his perseverance, for his integrity, and for all that he did, not just for this particular young man, but what the gentleman does in terms of the moral integrity of this institution. I congratulate the gentleman from North Carolina.

Mr. JONES of North Carolina. Mr. Speaker, the gentleman is extremely kind, I thank him very much, and may God bless America.

THE NICS IMPROVEMENT ACT

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. MACK). Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from New York (Mrs. MCCARTHY) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mrs. MCCARTHY of New York. Mr. Speaker, the NICS system, the National Instant Criminal Background

Check System, is the database used to check potential firearm buyers for any criminal record or history of mental illness.

In large part, NICS has been a success. Since 1994, more than 700,000 individuals were denied a gun for failing the background check. However, the NICS system is only as good as the information States provide. Twenty-five States have automated less than 60 percent of their felony convictions into the NICS system. In these States, many felons will not turn up on the NICS system and would be able to purchase guns with no questions asked. In 13 States, domestic violence restraining orders are not accessible through the NICS system. Common sense would dictate that you do not sell a gun to someone who has been served with a restraining order. Thirty-three States have not automated or do not share mental health records that could disqualify certain individuals from buying a gun.

Sadly, this particular loophole in the NICS system cost two of my constituents their lives. On March 8, 2002, Peter Troy purchased a .22 caliber semiautomatic rifle. He had a history of mental health problems, and his own mother had a restraining order against him as a result of his violent background. It was illegal for him to purchase a gun; but like so many others, he simply slipped through the cracks of the NICS system. Four days later, Peter Troy walked into Our Lady of Peace Church in Lynbrook, New York, opened fire, and killed the Reverend Lawrence Penzes and Eileen Tosner.

Peter Troy had no business buying a gun, and the system created to prevent him from doing so failed. It is only a matter of time before the system's failings provoke larger tragedies. We must fix the NICS system now.

While we lay the responsibility for the NICS system on the States, many State budgets are already overburdened, which is why I introduced H.R. 1415, the NICS Improvement Act. This legislation would provide grants to States to update the NICS system. States would be able to update the NICS databases to include felons, people with certain mental and emotional disabilities, and domestic abusers. It is actually enforcing the 1962 gun control law.

We need the NICS Improvement Act to become law, and we need more bills like this to be passed. These are ideas that impose no new restrictions on gun owners, but give the government the tools to ensure existing laws are effective and enforceable.

In fact, the NICS Improvement Act already passed the House in the 107th Congress by a voice vote. The bill had the endorsement of the National Rifle Association. Unfortunately, the other body never acted on the bill.

This is commonsense gun legislation we can all agree on. This bill will save lives while not infringing on anybody's second amendment rights.